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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KIGALI 000857

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SUBJECT: SENATE PRESIDENT OPPOSES ANTI-HOMOSEXUAL
LEGISLATION, CONSIDERS BID FOR PRESIDENCY

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Classified By: Ambassador W. Stuart Symington for reasons 1.4 (b) (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: During a December 4 meeting with Ambassador, Senate president Vincent Biruta said he was opposed to anti-homosexual language in the current draft penal code, and he did not expect such language to pass. Biruta said his party, the Social Democratic Party (PSD), would soon decide whether or not to field a candidate for next year's presidential election. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Ambassador and polcouns met December 4 with Dr. Vincent Biruta, president of the Senate and leader of the Social Democratic Party (PSD), in his office. Tone of the meeting was friendly.

¶3. (C) In response to a question about the draft penal code, which contains language criminalizing homosexuality, Biruta said he was against criminalizing it and did not think it would appear in the final version. (Note: This legislation has yet to reach the Senate; it has been in the lower house's in-box for several weeks, without apparent movement. End Note.) Regarding input from the public, Biruta said parliament did not receive enough of it, and that parliament planned to make more use of radio broadcasts and its website in order to inform and engage voters.

¶4. (C) Reviewing the history of the PSD, Biruta said the party was founded in 1991, and he himself joined it late that year; he was in Belgium at the time. The main focus of the PSD was ending the dictatorship of former president Habyarimana and his party, the National Republican Movement for Democracy and Development (MRND). In particular, the PSD was sympathetic to Rwandans abroad who wanted to return to their country but were prevented from doing so by the then-Government of Rwanda, which claimed there was insufficient land in Rwanda for returnees. The Habyarimana regime, Biruta continued, was a small, corrupt and brutal dictatorship, characterized by exclusion, both on a regional and an ethnic basis. Biruta returned to Rwanda in 1992 to rejoin his family. During the genocide two years later, his parents and five siblings were murdered, but his wife and children survived.

¶5. (C) Turning to Rwanda's 2008 parliamentary elections, Biruta explained that three groups competed for seats: the PSD, the Liberal Party (PL), and the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) coalition, which included several smaller parties. Similarly, for the 2003 parliamentary elections the PSD decided to run on its own and maintain autonomy instead of joining the RPF coalition, even though "that would have been easier." The PSD did support President Kagame for the 2003 presidential elections, however, because the country needed a

uniting figure to lead it.

¶6. (C) Biruta, noting that Rwanda sometimes draws criticism for its political system, asked, "What's wrong with having a good president?" Kagame was a good president, he reiterated, emphasizing that nevertheless, individuals could run against him during the 2010 elections. PSD leaders planned to meet within the next two weeks to discuss holding a party congress in early 2010. If the party decides to field a presidential candidate, "I'll back him," Biruta concluded.

¶7. (C) BIO NOTE: Biruta was born July 19, 1958 in Shyorongi, a few kilometers northwest of Kigali. A Tutsi, he grew up in Rwanda and studied at the National University of Rwanda and later in Belgium, earning a medical degree. He was chief of Qlater in Belgium, earning a medical degree. He was chief of staff in the ministry of health under the interim government of 1993-94, minister of health 1997-99, and minister of public works, transportation and communication 1999-2000. He was speaker of parliament from 2000-2003. In 2003, after he again won election to the lower house, Kagame appointed him to the Senate, which in turn elected him to be its president, a position he is due to give up in 2011 after an eight-year term.

¶8. (C) COMMENT: The PSD is Rwanda's second-largest political party, having officially won 13 percent of the vote during the 2008 parliamentary elections. It may have lost some supporters to the recently-formed Parti Social Imberakuri (PS-Imberakuri), which is headed by a former PSD member. The party's broader concern, however, is preparing for Rwanda's eventual leadership transition, assuming Kagame wins reelection in 2010 and steps down in 2017 as mandated by the constitution. One way to do this would be for Biruta to campaign in 2010, not to compete with Kagame but in order to

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better position himself and his party to compete in the future. The risk is that if he runs and makes a poor showing, it could damage his and the PSD's future prospects.
END COMMENT.
SYMINGTON